



Photos by Carol N. Vu for Northwest Asian Weekly

Seattle City Council member Tom Rasmussen (at podium) announces during a press conference that the majority of the council would be voting in favor of the Morrison Hotel site (pictured at left) for the homeless-service center. Looking on are council members (from left) Jean Godden, Nick Licata, David Della and Peter Steinbrueck.

Pioneer Square, not I.D., for homeless center

By Carol N. Vu
Northwest Asian Weekly

Many Chinatown/International District advocates breathed a sigh of relief following the City Council's 8-1 vote on Monday that picked the Morrison Hotel in Pioneer Square as the site of Seattle's new hygiene center for homeless men.

"I think it's a big win for our neighborhood," said Tim Wang, executive director of the Chinatown/I.D. Business Improvement Area.

Wang and many others in the neighborhood were strongly opposed to the mayor's idea of situating the homeless center at the intersection of Fourth and Yesler, inside the

emergency-command center that the city is planning for that block.

Through letters, e-mails and face-to-face talks, these advocates argued to the mayor and council that Chinatown/I.D. is already bearing the brunt of social services, and that such programs should be distributed evenly throughout the downtown area. Because the hygiene center would attract more homeless people to the area, they feared that local businesses would face increased hardships. They also insisted that the city renew its commitment to adding housing to the neighborhood in order to attract families.

Following months of lobbying, the council this week chose to locate the service center a block and a half away from the mayor's proposed site, inside the Morrison Hotel, at Third and Yesler. The nonprofit Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC) will develop the 8,600-square-foot facility at a cost of \$2.1 million. DESC already operates services out of that location for the homeless population.

That block and a half might sound like a negligible distance, but it is significant to Chinatown/I.D., said Tom Im, a community planner at Interim Community Development Association.

"In a way, there are physical barriers. Fourth Avenue is like a river. Yesler bridge is more of a hill to climb or go under. That can deter certain individuals from drifting into our neighborhoods," Im said.

With the exception of President Jan Drago, everyone on the City Council praised the Morrison Hotel site as a superior choice to the command center.

"This is a responsible proposal that puts forward a sound plan that would serve more people sooner and cost less," council member Tom Rasmussen said.

DESC "is an experienced provider of these services and would be able to put this into service for more people, for more hours and provide them with more services. I feel like we're getting a lot more bang for our buck," said council member Jean Godden.

Three months ago, following the mayor's proposal to site it at the command center, Rasmussen requested and was granted extra time to find alternative locations. He said he was concerned about the high cost of the proposed facility (at \$500 per square foot) and wondered whether it was safe to co-locate the service center with emergency and

fire facilities. Rasmussen sought input from communities, including Chinatown/I.D.'s and Pioneer Square's.

DESC's plan at the Morrison, Rasmussen announced in January, emerged as the best. It would provide 3,000 more square feet than the mayor's preferred site, cost \$1.1 million less, serve more people and open a year earlier — in the spring of 2006.

Drago, a Pioneer Square resident, went against her colleagues and maintained her support of the mayor's original proposal. "The location," she said grimly before casting her vote, "does not have the support of my neighborhood."

Following the vote, Nickels praised the council for its support of a comprehensive downtown homeless facility. In a written statement, he called it a critical step toward his goal of ending homelessness in 10 years.

Council members did not downplay the mayor's role in setting aside \$3.2 million last fall to support a homeless-service center.

"Mayor Nickels' compassionate leadership put this process in motion," Rasmussen said. "He committed \$3.2 million to funding a new homeless center, and I pledged to make sure we spent those dollars wisely."

Rasmussen and others want the \$1.1 million that will be saved to go towards improvements to Pioneer Square and mitigating the effects of the center on the surrounding area.

The center will offer a night shelter to adult homeless men, restrooms, an indoor meal program, showers and a laundry service. It will also provide referrals to housing, health care, employment and counseling services to help end the cycle of homelessness.

Both Wang and Im empathize with the many Pioneer Square activists and business people who did not want the hygiene center in their area.

"It's going to be hard on Pioneer Square," Im acknowledged.

"The intention was not to be pitted against the Pioneer Square neighborhood," said Wang. "We've worked with them on a number of issues in the past. ... I hope this isn't future cause for issues down the line with them. Collectively, as neighborhoods so close together, along

with the Duwamish (neighborhood), we need to be unified and cohesive and work together to mitigate its (the hygiene center's) effects."

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